

The Spirit of Prophecy Series:



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“He said to them, ‘How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?’ And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself” (Luke 24:25-27).

“He said to them, ‘This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.’ Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, ‘This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day’” (Luke 24:44-46).

“In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days, he has spoken to us in his Son” (Hebrews. 1:1, 2).

“For he received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.’ We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain. And we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts” (2 Peter 1:17-19).

The Spirit of Prophecy

Introduction

Prophecy...

As the word hangs there in the ether, what comes to mind? A hairy man in burlap, pointing his finger and shouting? A one world government? The end of the world? For many of us, the only thing we definitely associate with prophecy is a big question mark. Yet, as the scriptures on the preceding page show, the New Testament contains some clear statements about prophecy. Jesus taught that all scripture, prophecy included, found its fulfillment in Himself. While every prophecy has an historical fulfillment relating to the circumstances in which it is given, its full meaning is only realized in the person and work of Christ. This holds true even of prophecies whose fulfillment we still await.

The “end times” seem to be a continual sources of curiosity, intrigue, and confusion among Christians. Mountains of books—fiction and non-fiction—have been written on the subject. Movies have been made and remade. Every teacher worth his salt has weighed in. Theologians and fanatics alike have fastidiously woven scripture and world events into timelines. What has been lost in all of this is Jesus. Many have searched the prophets more diligently for the antichrist than for Christ, though the prophets themselves did not do this (1 Peter 1:10, 11). Wars, rumors of wars, famines, earthquakes, pestilence, and persecution are clues in a cosmic “who-dunnit” instead of being seen for what they are: signs of *His coming* (Matt. 24:3-14). When Christ ceases to be the center and interpretation of the end-times, it is little wonder that there is so much confusion about them among believers.

To put this in theological terms, the chief value of prophecy lies in its Christology, not its eschatology. Jesus said the law and the prophets all hang on two commandments: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself (Matt. 22:37-40). “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers” (1 John 3:16). Prophecy has no purpose other than to draw us into Christ and to make us living sacrifices in His image (Rom. 12:1, 2). If our treatment of prophecy does not compel us to live for Jesus instead of ourselves, we may fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, but, not having love, will be nothing in the sight of God (2 Cor. 5:15; 1 Cor. 13:2).

The “Spirit of Prophecy” series is based on Revelation 19:10—“For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.” The aim of this series is two fold: 1) To discover the testimony of Jesus in the words of the prophets; 2) By discovering the testimony of Jesus, to rescue the prophetic books from the carnal and even fantastical interpretations which they have sometimes been subjected. Restoring the testimony of Jesus to the prophets also allows prophetic voices to fulfill their original ministry. God spoke through prophets to deal with the hearts of His people, to heal their unfaithfulness, to draw them back to Himself so that they might worship Him in spirit and in truth (John 4:24). This ministry is largely lost when prophecy is treated as a way to decode current events. Only by lifting up Jesus will men be drawn to God (John 12:32, 33).

This is not to say that the interpretations offered here are the only ones possible. Hopefully, the ways of seeing Jesus in the prophets are as endless as God Himself. But if this series can cause the reader to think differently about the prophets, to search them for Jesus instead of end-times timelines, then it will have accomplished its purpose.

Malachi: Messenger of the Covenant

Covenant—God’s marriage to His people—is the heart of the book of Malachi. Fittingly, it mainly addresses the Levites (Levi means “joined to”). The Levites were the priests of Israel, the main caretakers and nurturers of the covenant. On the surface, Malachi is a sort of laundry list of ways that the Levites (and Israel as a whole) had violated their covenant relationship with God. But deeper than the words we can hear the Lord’s longing for a bride who will be faithful to Him. Accordingly, the book begins, “‘I have loved you,’ says the LORD” (Mal. 1:2).

The Proof of God’s Love

As proof of His love, God pointed to the fact that He chose His people in Jacob and delivered them from the oppression of Esau, their own flesh and blood: “I have loved Jacob but Esau I have hated, and I have turned his mountains into a wasteland and left his inheritance to the desert jackals.... They will be called the wicked land, a people always under the wrath of the Lord” (Mal. 1:2-4).

Esau was the first-born son of Isaac, the one destined to inherit the covenant promises God had made to his father Isaac and to his grandfather Abraham. But Esau despised his birthright and sold it for a bowl of soup so that he would not die of starvation (Gen. 25:29-34). The book of Hebrews calls Esau godless and immoral (Heb. 12:16, 17). Thus, Esau represents the godless and immoral race of Adam, a race that cares more for its own skin than for God’s friendship. It is into this race we are all born, under whose enslavement to sin and self-interest we all suffer (John 8:34).

God has loved the church, the true descendants of Jacob, and has chosen us in His Son. “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us” (1 Jn. 3:16). As part of His loving sacrifice, Jesus took all godlessness and immorality into Himself (2 Cor. 5:21). He became Esau. Through the cross, God destroyed the godless and immoral man. He made Esau a wasteland, forever under the Lord’s wrath, never to rise again. But Christ did rise from the dead. What is more, we were raised in Him and made to share in the eternal covenant between God and the Son He loves. Ephesians says, “But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy...raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ” (Eph. 2:4-6). God forever separated us from sin and destroyed its power over us. “For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin—because anyone who has died has been freed from sin” (Rom. 6:6, 7). As far as concerns our needs, the offering Jesus presented at the cross was completely sufficient. There is not one way that God failed to provide for us. There is not one way He failed to love us. We could enumerate further examples of this, such as victory over death, the humiliation of our enemy, and the crucifixion of the world (1 Cor. 15:54, 55; Col. 2:15; Gal. 6:14). Yet suffice it to say that Jesus proved God’s love by presenting an offering that lacked nothing.

What Have You Done for Me Lately?

Divorce was in the hearts of the Levites. God's love was demonstrated in His choosing of them in Jacob, in the defeat of their godless enemy. But as overwhelming as God's love was, they could not see it and asked, "How have you loved us?" (Mal. 1:2).

How often in the church do we respond to the cross in the same unfeeling way? "Thanks for dying for me, Lord, but what have you done for me lately?" We often see no connection between the cross and our daily lives—other than a feeble sense that God has forgiven us. God must continually move according to our expectations in order to re-prove His love, or we begin to doubt and despise His great sacrifice. We may read verses (such as the one just quoted from Romans 6) which declare that the cross has freed us from the power of sin. But when we fail we easily conclude that the cross is insufficient. We may read that we have everything we need for life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3). But in situations where we feel inadequate and ungodly we again conclude that God hasn't truly provided what we need in the cross.

There are many other examples we could give, but the bottom line is this: we believe what we observe, think, and feel and reject the reality of the cross. The cross is so much more than a historical event. It is a daily source that never leaves us in need. In the crucified, yet living Christ, we find rest and living water, restoration for our souls and righteousness for His name's sake. He is anointing on our heads, a cup running over, a table set in the presence of our enemies, an eternal dwelling (Psalm 23). Although the truth—"Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified"—is before our very eyes in scripture, in hymns, in fellowship, in all the trappings and accoutrements of church life, we still allow the facts of our experience to bring divorce into our hearts (Gal. 3:1).

Defiled Offerings

The divorce in the Levites' hearts, the callousness with which they regarded the Lord's sacrificial love for them, ultimately defiled their ministry to the Lord. "A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If I am a father where is the honor due me? If I am a master, where is the respect due me?" says the LORD Almighty. "It is you, O priests, who show contempt for my name" (Mal. 1:6). Again, the Lord's words reflect how wounded He felt by His people. But once again, this was lost on the Levites who countered, "How have we shown contempt for your name?" (Mal. 1:6). It is hard to fathom how much this must have grieved the Lord. The Levites had His law. They were supposed to be keepers and teachers of it. Surely they knew that offering a defective animal on God's altar was an offense to Him.¹ Yet that is what they did. "When you bring blind animals for sacrifice, is that not wrong? [...] When you bring injured, crippled, or diseased animals and offer them as sacrifices, should I accept them from your hands?" says the LORD" (Mal. 1:8, 13). What made these offerings even more odious was that the Levites already possessed the means to make an acceptable sacrifice: "Cursed is the cheat who has an acceptable male in his flock and vows to give it, but then sacrifices a blemished animal to the LORD" (Mal. 1:14).

Defiled offerings are the flesh offering itself, and the church is full of such offerings. As keepers and teachers of the gospel, we who are the priesthood of believers ought to know that Jesus's offering was full and complete, lacking nothing. We ought to know that all spiritual work was finished at the cross, that God asks nothing of us except that we believe and rest in His

¹ Lev. 1:3, 10; 3:1, 6; 4:3, 23, 28; 5:15, 18; 6:6.

work (John 19:30; Heb. 4:3, 10). But because we do not grasp, do not believe, or are callous to the fullness of the cross, our pious, fleshly minds reach their own conclusions about what God desires. Like little Dr. Christiansteins, we work feverishly in our religious laboratories. We take whatever combo of teaching, worship, prayer, and evangelism seems right to us, stitch it together, electrify it with self-effort, and cry out, “It’s alive! It’s alive!” But it is only a travesty of life, a monster we have created. We offer our Christianity instead of Christ. We have a zeal for God but not according to knowledge (Rom. 10:2; Prov. 19:2). Except for the missing eye, the scars, and the slouching limp, it looks a lot like Jesus. It is such a good mimic we even fool ourselves much of the time.

But God isn’t fooled. As He told the Levites: “I will accept no offering from your hands” (Mal. 1:10). The only offering He will ever accept is the One seated at His right hand. There is an acceptable male in God’s flock: Jesus Christ. He is the only offering we will ever need.

Defiled Teaching, Defiled People

For the Levites, the result of trusting in defiled offerings was defiled teaching: “You have turned from the way and by your teaching caused many to stumble” (Mal. 2:8). Malachi chapter two goes on to detail the idolatry in which all of Judah was engaged. The teaching of the Levites spread like leprosy, defiling all of God’s people.

When we conclude that Christ’s offering is somehow deficient, we turn aside from Him as our way—our means and path of godliness. We then try some other way that seems to get the results we expect and teach others to do the same. There isn’t always evil intent in this. A person’s very eagerness for the things of God may cause them to grab onto anything that promises a fuller experience of the Lord. But whatever the intent, we break faith with the Lord and consort with other lovers whom we believe will make us fruitful (Mal. 2:11-15).

In our quest to compensate for the inadequacy of the cross we will travel land and sea, winning many converts as we go (Matt. 23:15). Like the Galatians, we may rely on obedience to the law as a means of holiness, teaching others that they must fulfill things of which Christ was the end (Rom. 10:4). Or, we may cultivate spiritual giftedness and anointed ministries—things destined to pass away—instead of self-sacrifice and the way of love.² The Colossians among us seek for God’s fullness in human tradition and philosophy and not in Christ (Col. 2:8, 9). Others teach that “godliness is a means to financial gain,” and trade the marks of the Lamb for the mark of the consumer (Gal. 6:17; Rev. 13:17).

In any case, whatever we truly believe we will teach for “out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks” (Matt. 12:34). When we do not teach the true and only offering of Christ, we are breaking faith—not remaining true to our Lord and damaging the faith our hearers have in Him. “‘I hate divorce,’ says the LORD God of Israel.... So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith” (Mal. 2:16).

The Lord in His Temple

Despite their faithlessness, the Lord told Israel, “I the LORD do not change. So you, O descendents of Jacob, are not destroyed” (Mal. 3:6). Thank God that He remains faithful to us even when we are faithless toward Him (2 Tim. 2:13). As a demonstration of His commitment, the Lord promised to send the messenger of the covenant, one who would recall the Levites to

² 1 Cor. 1:24; 12:31-13:8; 14:37-40; 2 Cor. 11:5, 6.

their marriage vows (Mal. 3:1). The messenger of the covenant would also prepare for the Lord's appearing in the temple (Mal. 3:1, 2). This was saying a lot, for while the Lord always dwelled in the temple in Jerusalem, He was hidden from view by a veil. The Lord's promise to appear was a promise to remove the veil in the temple, to remove the division existing between God and His people because of sin.

John the Baptist (and Jesus Himself) came as the messenger of a new covenant, a covenant in which sin would be completely, eternally removed by the Lamb of God (Matt. 11:10; John 1:29; Luke 22:20; Heb. 9:12). Through His message, then, John prepared God's people for the union Jesus would achieve by dying on the cross and rising from the dead (John 17:21). When Jesus died, God gave a sign that this union had indeed been achieved: the veil in the temple was torn in two (Matt. 27:51).

Scripture tells us that we are now the temple of God (1 Cor. 3:16). In Christ, the veil has been removed. But like the Levites, unbelief may blind our minds to the glory of Christ (2 Cor. 4:4). In this case, a veil remains, not on Christ, but on our minds, and we are unable to perceive Him in scripture or in His body (2 Cor. 3:14, 15). But if we turn to the Lord, we gaze on Him with an unveiled face, and Christ Himself appears or is revealed in us (2 Cor. 3:16).

An Offering in Righteousness

“But who can...stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. He will...purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD” (Mal. 3:2-4). The unveiling of the Lord in His temple was the divine antidote for the unfaithfulness and divorce poisoning the hearts of the Levites. When the Lord appears, flesh is consumed and impurities are removed. “And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit” (2 Cor. 3:18). Flesh is consumed because the One who is unveiled in us is the One who died to sin once for all, who was put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit (Rom. 6:10; 1 Peter 3:18). In other words, the true offering Himself appears within His temple. Now the temple has an offering that isn't from it's own hand, that isn't a fleshly mockery of the true (Mal. 1:10). When the Lord appears, when we no longer live but Christ lives in us, we are able to bring an offering in righteousness, one that God will accept.

The True Gospel

The revelation of Christ also purifies the message we share with others. If we do not rely on offerings or methods apart from the cross, we will not preach them. The church has been promised to one Husband, to Christ. The priesthood of believers must have a godly jealousy for her instead of putting up with the preaching of another Jesus or a different gospel (2 Cor. 11:2-4). However, this isn't to say that we should wantonly crusade against whatever we deem false teaching. The answer isn't to externally impose human standards. We must trust in the Holy Spirit's work of revealing Christ in each believer since it is from the revealed Christ that our gospel flows (Gal. 1:15, 16). Our first concern should be that Christ is truly appearing in us. Then, and only then, the Lord may lead us to share with others. Jesus is not a message we need to get right. He is a Person whose appearing must consume what is not the divine nature in us (2

Peter 1:4). If our main concern is knowing the correct message, we do not yet know as we ought, for “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up” (1 Cor. 8:1).

By preaching the true gospel in love we join the Lord’s ministry to His bride: “the washing with water through the word” (Eph. 5:26). The defilement of strange gospels and false offerings disappears as the bride listens to the voice of her Husband. In this way, she becomes “a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish” (Eph. 5:27). “[A]nd the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD” (Mal. 3:4).

Faithful Bride, True Levites

Then those who feared the LORD talked with each other, and the LORD listened and heard. A scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the LORD and honored his name.

“They will be mine,” says the LORD almighty, “in the day when I make up my treasured possession. I will spare them, just as in compassion a man spares his son who serves him. And you will again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not” (Mal. 3:17, 18).

God took note of those who responded to Malachi’s message. Those who longed for the Lord to appear in His temple—and not all who were called by the name of Israel—God promised to set apart as His treasured possession. In the same way, God takes note, not of all those who claim the name of Jesus, but of those being prepared as a bride for her Husband (Rev. 21:2). To have the spirit of the bride is to be a true Levite—truly joined to the Lord, truly one flesh with the Lamb, God’s offering. To gather in this spirit is to long for the Lord’s appearing and to talk together about the revealed Christ (2 Tim. 4:8). As our hearts long for the Lord Jesus, and as we fellowship in Him, we create an environment in which He may appear in us with ever-increasing glory. This is the faithful bride the Lord desires: one who realizes that her body belongs to her Husband and exists for His appearing (1 Cor. 7:4).

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The word is not just knowledge about God. Rather, as John 1:1 says, “the Word was God.” It is hoped that the reader will not just receive knowledge or teaching about God but God Himself. “This is eternal life, that they may know you, the one true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent”

(John 17:3).

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